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ABSTRACT

Children ages 5-6 were questioned in an informal setting about their favorite stories, and all responded with titles of videos, rather than books. When asked specifically about stories in books, children's responses were more hesitant, and were often books of television programs or films. Another informal study was conducted, in which a teacher read a story aloud to children ages 9-10. Each student had a copy of the book, which contained surreal, complex illustrations. Children did not see the print and pictures as a whole text and initially disregarded the pictures. Teachers may place so much emphasis in the teaching of reading on decoding the written word that the emphasis is shifted from other ways of conveying meaning. Phonic knowledge, graphic knowledge, word recognition, grammatical knowledge, and contextual understanding are all important in helping children to become independent readers, but children can also be taught to consider the quality and depth of what they read, have read to them, or see on a video. Children should be encouraged to reflect on their literary experiences, to infer, predict, and trace connections within and between other stories, whether they be Disney videos or the highest quality children's literature. (SWC)

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Never Mind the Book, I've Seen the Video

by
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I remember many years ago being asked by an anxious reception class teacher to "look at" Justin who, unusually in that particular school, had arrived, apparently being able to read fluently. Justin and I spent a very happy half hour together in the school library, looking at, reading and talking about books together. There was no doubt that Justin was able to read, in the fullest sense of the word, and enjoyed a wide range of reading materials. I reported this back to his class teacher and suggested that she just let him read a variety of books and talk with him about his reading rather than "hear him read." She looked at me with horror and stammered, "But he'll miss out on the basics."

Admittedly that was several years ago now, but recalling the incident recently made me wonder exactly what the basics were in reading and what we are hoping to achieve when we help children to become readers. What is it that children need in order to develop as "enthusiastic, independent and reflective reader" (NCC 1995)?

In recent years there has been an emphasis on the centrality of the text in reading. Margaret Meek's seminal book *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* (1988) has made many of us look again at the books we use in the classroom. We have become more aware of the way in which texts can help or hinder the inexperienced reader and we have taken on board all the implications that has for teaching and classroom practice. Publishers are also more aware of the need for high quality in books for young readers and no longer is it possible to distinguish between scheme books as being "bad" and "read" books as "good". We have become more selective in our selection of books and are less inclined to accept a "package" created by someone else.

This emphasis, however, has also influenced the way we approach books in the classroom. Children are expected, indeed encouraged, to return to well loved texts to reread them and on each reading gain greater insights. In shared reading we talk about the way in which characters are portrayed, the choices of language a author has made and make critical responses to the text. The expectation that children are to develop as "....reflective readers" is an interesting one. What is a reflective reader? What does s/he do? Indeed, as a teacher of reading I need to ask, "Am I a reflective reader?"

Dombey (1992) describes what it is that fluent seven year old readers do. She says:

...they know that to make sense of a text they must bring some of the meaning with them in their heads, that reading is an interpretive act where the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts....that working out what a text might mean is a matter of making it mean, by orchestrating all those cuing systems and all these kinds of knowledge during the process of reading. (p.10)

I want to explore just one small but significant "kind of knowledge" and see how children today draw on that knowledge in order to be reflective readers. I am referring to children's knowledge of other texts, of the "world of literature" that will give them an understanding of how books work in terms of language, structure, story and so much more and will help them to read texts, appreciating the cross-references to others. Much has been written about the importance of storying for children's literacy development (Wells 1986) and the volume called *The Cool Web* (Meek et al 1977) linked the development of literacy with literature building on that essential element of storying through Barbara Hardy's now well-known phrase describing narrative as "a primary act of mind" (p.12)

In rereading this I was drawn to Applebee's conversations with children on the nature of stories (p.5), particularly the part where he asked "Where does Cinderella live?" and so began to explore the distinction children mad between the world of story and the world of reality.

I had been working in a primary school looking at the development of comprehension throughout the school and exploring ways of encouraging and fostering children's understanding of texts. I began with a small group of Year 1 children (5-6 year olds) looking at an enlarged version of

Each, Peach, Pear Plum. We read the story together and talked about the characters, looking for them as they were hidden on each page. The children enjoyed the book and in particular enjoyed the "I Spy" aspect of reading it. However, I was amazed that they recognized so few of the characters and made no connection at all with other books they had read or stories they had heard.

I repeated the exercise with another small group of children from a parallel class in the same school but this time before looking at the book spent some time reminding ourselves of nursery rhymes and fairy stories we knew. This again gave me some interesting insights.

Several of the children remembered Cinderella but claimed never to have read a book about her or heard the story. However, they had all seen the Disney video. One little girl proceeded to give me a blow-by-blow account of the video, remembering even the minutest details. What was significant though was the details that were remembered. She described how the mice ate some crumbs from the floor, where they came from and where they disappeared to. She knew, however, nothing at all about the fairy godmother, when pushed, she said "Oh yes, somebody came and gave her a new dress." To her this was almost a minor detail, while to me it is one of the key elements of the fairy story. This child was by no means unique. Other children in the group talked about the videos they had seen, Disney interpretations of well-known fairy stories. They could recall the sequence of events in great detail and yet failed to appreciate the "magi" element that for me made it a fairy story.

One of the key features of a reflective reader, surely, is the ability to recognize and appreciate the intertextuality in books; that is the way in which texts draw and build on each other, creating a richly intertwined network of ideas and images. To read effectively and reflectively is to be able to see, relate and understand these links. A "good book" surely is one which allows the reader to read it at different levels; to return over and over again each time to see another connection or link and so deepen the meaning with is brought to and taken from the text. The literary network which exists within the world of literature is the one to which we desire children to belong. Can they find the way in if they are not aware of the basic "doorways" and if the language they are learning gives them a different way of seeing from the way of the book?

Brice Heath talks about texts as being children's ways of "taking meaning from a culture" and showed how young children can have very different experiences of literacy according to the culture within which they grow up. These differences relate not only to the uses to which literacy is put, but also the perceptions of what counts as literacy and the way in which literacy is discussed and valued. Meek (1988) talks about how we each are experienced and inexperienced at reading different kinds of texts. My husband is a lawyer and reads with ease texts which to me consist of dense impenetrable prose and to which and from which I am unable to find no meaning at all. Yet I read texts which he is unable to read with ease. We each are experienced in reading different sorts of texts, as Margaret Meek says we have "come to know how to read the texts of (our) subjects" (1988 p.6). We did this through reading many texts and talking about them with colleagues; we begin to see links and explore them; we begin to appreciate what is meant by what is written and also by what is not written. We gain in experience of reading and so we become effective readers because we know what to expect and we have some idea of what the experiences of reading will be like.

The children I was talking to did not seem to have had that vast experience of reading "literary" texts and yet they had huge experiences of watching videos. I wanted to know what effect, if any, this would have on them as they developed as readers.

The conversation I had with them was very unstructured and informal and in no way could be described as hard research. I console myself with the fact that the conversations Applebee had with children were of a similar nature (1973) and the insights gained from these conversations can serve to point the way for future inquiry.

I began by asking the children what their favorite story was. I deliberately chose the word "story" rather than book because I did not want to bias their answers in favor of books. The titles that every child gave me were of videos rather than books. I then asked about stories in books and the answers which came were much more hesitant and were often books of television program or films. The children told me that they preferred watching videos to reading a book and the answers they gave me were summed up very eloquently by one boy. "When you watch a video the pictures change for you and you don't have to make them for yourself. When you watch a video it's quicker and it does it for you; you don't have to waste your voice. When you read a book you have to think lot."

I then followed Applebee's pattern and asked them "Where does Cinderella live?" The answer came quickly and without hesitation, "In Disneyland." "Can you go and visit Cinderella?" "Yes, I've been, I've seen her and I've talked to her. "Is Cinderella a real person?" "Yes, she's a real person dressed up in Cinderella's clothes." Their answers raise many questions in my mind: Does the immediacy of the video and the reality the visit to Disneyworld change the image of story in children's minds?

Meek (1988) makes the point about the place of film when discussing Huckleberry Finn:

"When a novel as "layered" as this is turned into a film the "meanings" have to be translated into the semiotics of the visual. What disappears is not the plot, the characters or the recollection of "what happens" but the experience of reading. Television and books are allies. I don't believe that the one drives out the other. But we need to be clearer about the kinds of "reading offered by both." (p.38)

How do we help children engage in these different types of reading according to the "text" in front of them. How do we help children to see that an active involvement in a text, be it a video or a book, can enhance both the enjoyment and the satisfaction?

Barthes (1977) described narrative as being "international, transhistorical and transcultural" and so we should be able to use these experiences that children bring to school to use as a basis for literacy development. Fox (1993) says,

"Teachers sometimes reject the stories pupils bring to school from TV or films. But, as Mock argues, TV actually helps children to "keep the story going" and find out how narratives work. If this is the major shared story culture for many children - possibly for all of them, even the readers - then we ought to find ways to legitimize that culture and let children retell, act out and write down these stories too, however 'unsuitable' or predictable some of us might think they are."(p.193-4)

Marie Clay, as part of the Reading Recovery program, stresses the importance of introducing a text to children before they come to read it. She suggests going through the book with children, explaining anything that might cause a problem, modelling particular uses of language and giving children a way through to the meaning of the text. This is something which is suggested for children who have been identified as not reading effectively within their classroom. Perhaps this is something we should consider for children who are being introduced to different ways of reading and do not seem to be able to make the connections between the texts they know and the texts they encounter in the classroom.

I spent a time with a group of Year 5 children (9-10 year olds) looking at the book *I Hate My Teddy* by Dave McKee. The children each had their own copy of the book and were able to follow the book as I read it to them. I read slowly and allowed the children time to look at the pictures. The text of this book is very simple but the pictures have a most surreal quality and contain many strange and bizarre happenings.

When I had read the book to them I asked the children what it was about. They gave me a very accurate retelling of the story of the text but made no reference at all to what was going on in the pictures. I then asked them if anything else was happening and suggested they look at the pictures. Once they had been "given permission" to do this there was no stopping the children and they began to find all sorts of "stories" and to chase connections through the book. It was interesting that they did not see the print and pictures as a whole text and initially disregarded the pictures completely; perhaps it was because we place so much emphasis in our teaching of reading on decoding the written word that the emphasis is shifted from other ways of conveying meaning. The use of picture books throughout many primary schools can be a marvelous way of helping children to infer, to predict, to trace the connections and to look forwards and backwards.

This takes us back to the first group of children who were reading *Each, Peach, Pear Plum*. How can we build on their understanding of the world of Disney and let that lead them on to a richer and more varied diet of literary experiences? There are several ways of looking at this. Applebee (1978) talks about the two major structuring principles which he sees within stories - the centering principle which identifies an overall theme and the "chaining" principle which shows how events are linked. Applebee argues that these two principles can be applied to all major literary

forms. It must follow, therefore, that children who come with a familiarity with the world of Disney have competencies which can be applied to the world of books. Our role is "to lead children into literacy through what they already know and can recognize." (Fox 1993, p.193) The children to whom I was talking seemed to have focused in on the detail of the video and perhaps needed some help to identify the central theme of the story. This then could be used as a starting point to look at other book versions of the traditional tale. Many teachers now use the many different versions of traditional stories that have been produced as a way of exploring the construction of a text; including a video seems an obvious next step. Even Shakespeare is now available in animated form on video! Directing the children's attention to similarities and differences, to character portrayal and to sequence of plot can provide a valuable teaching strategy.

The concern must be that for any children the world of Disney becomes reality - emphasized by the "actual" world of Disneyworld and by the many artifacts and experiences that come as part of the package. It is tempting, for those of us who know "the real thing" to dismiss this as a watered down version. I would argue vehemently that the Disney "Pooh" bears no comparison to the original A. A. character! However, it is often these experiences that children bring with them and we need to recognize and use them as a way of extending the "types of knowledge and of reading" that they give to children. The video can give an instant immediate satisfaction which is perhaps less demanding than reading the book. However, the viewer is still required to "make sense of the text" and we need to consider what is involved in this process and how it relates to the process of bringing meaning to a written text.

Much has been written and discussed about the experiences of print which children bring to school with them and the importance of echoing and building on that in the classroom. Similarly, we must recognize the experiences of literary characters which children have had and extend and build on those to enable the children to enter the rich and varied world of literature.

I began by talking about Justin and his teacher's concern that he should not miss out on the basics. The National Curriculum for English (1995) in the *Programs of Study for Reading* identifies certain key skills. I would argue that Justin should be encouraged to look at those skills identified in Key Stage 2:

"Pupils should be taught to respond to consider in detail the quality and depth of what they read. They should be encouraged to respond imaginatively to the plot, characters, ideas, vocabulary and organization of language in literature. They should be taught to use inference and deduction. Pupils should be taught to evaluate the texts they read, and to refer to relevant passages or episodes to support their questions."

In fact, I would argue, that those skills apply to all children and do not necessarily come after the key skills of Key Stage 1 which are given as phonic knowledge, graphic knowledge, word recognition, grammatical knowledge and contextual understanding. Those are important in helping children to become independent readers but children can also be taught to consider the quality and depth of what they read, have read to them or see on a video. It is our responsibility, as those who are concerned with the development of readers, to encourage children to reflect on their literary experiences whether they be of Disney videos or children's literature of the highest quality.

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